

# PERSONS AND PASSIONS

*Essays in Honor of Annette Baier*

EDITED BY

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## What Are the Passions Doing in the *Meditations*?

LISA SHAPIRO

In this paper I want to draw attention to an aspect of Descartes' *Meditations* which often gets neglected, or even goes unnoticed: the passionate life of the meditator. Let me clarify: If one reads the *Meditations* with a fresh eye, one may well be struck by the meditator's expressing his feelings about things, feelings of desire, fear, surprise, wonder, and the like, at certain pivotal moments of the work, as well as by a general tone, which imparts to the reader a sense of the meditator's affective engagement in the project at hand. I will review these expressions in some detail in section 1 of this paper, but first I should say a bit more about my aim here.

This paper is largely exploratory, for—I will be honest—I am not sure what to make of the meditator's expression of the passions he is feeling. Perhaps it is a mere rhetorical flourish and nothing more. Even on this weak reading, however, the presence of the passions is a bit surprising. This surprise brings to the surface a tacit assumption that readers tend to make about the meditator, namely, that all his philosophy is a matter of pure thinking and that his thinking in that way might as well be done by a disembodied

substance. That the meditator feels passions, thus, challenges us to think about the nature of both pure thought and Descartes' dualism. I explore this line in section 2. But we can also read the presence of the passions in the *Meditations* more strongly, for these expressions might also be integral to the work. Certainly this sort of reading will challenge us in the ways the first sort of reading does. Taking the passions as integral to the *Meditations* might well also challenge certain conceptions of Descartes' philosophical program—about the project of the work and the goal of Cartesian epistemology. I sketch such a reading in section 3. So, it seems, the presence of the passions in the *Meditations* invites all sorts of questions.

My aim here is simply to begin to clarify those questions. Insofar as I raise questions about the standard readings of Descartes here, it might seem that I am implicitly concerned to undermine the received view of his thought. I thus want to be clear from the outset that I do not take these questions to imply that we should reject such readings wholesale. Rather, by considering the place of the passions in the *Meditations*, I want simply to press upon the way we tend to read Descartes, to bring to the surface just what we often take for granted, and to suggest that Descartes' own view might be more complex (and interesting in virtue of the tensions within it) than it initially appears.

### I. THE MEDITATOR'S EXPRESSIONS OF HIS PASSIONS

It will be useful for us to have in view the meditator's expression of his passions, so in this section I provide a catalog of the occurrences of those expressions. I will return to consider just what we should make of these displays of emotion.<sup>1</sup>

If we look closely at the text of the *Meditations*, we will find that meditator not only feels passions but also does so quite overtly. The First Meditation—indeed the project of first philosophy itself—begins from the meditator's *desire* to “establish something firm and lasting in the sciences.”<sup>2</sup> According to the *Passions of the Soul*, desire is a passion, and the definition Descartes gives of “desire” there fits quite nicely with the way it figures in the meditator's story. According to the *Passions*, “the passion of desire is an agitation of the soul, caused by the spirits, which disposes it to want for the

future the things it represents to itself to be suitable" (PS a. 27; AT XI 349). What the meditator represents to himself as suitable is just certainty, and he sets about, at an appropriate time, seeking what he wants.

In trying to satisfy his desire, however, the meditator is propelled into the series of skeptical arguments which form the First Meditation. These arguments in turn lead to other passions, quite vividly displayed. The arguments not only leave the meditator "diffident" (L. *diffidentia*; Fr. *défiance*, AT VII 22; AT IX 17) toward his former beliefs, but they also urge him to persist "obstinately" (L. *obstinate*; Fr. *obstinément*, AT VII 23; AT IX 18) in his meditations. The effort this persistence requires exhausts the meditator, leaving him with a set of mixed emotions. His self-description at the conclusion of the First Meditation is striking in this regard:

I am like a prisoner who has *enjoyed* [ *fruebatur*; *jouissait*] an imaginary freedom while asleep; as he begins to suspect that he is asleep, he *fears* [ *timet*; *craint*] being woken up and goes along with the pleasant illusion as long as he can. In the same way I spontaneously slide back into my old opinions and *am apprehensive about* [ *vereor*; *appréhende*] being shaken out of them. . . . (AT VII 23; emphasis mine)<sup>3</sup>

The Second Meditation picks up where the meditator left off. He is "like one who has unexpectedly fallen into a deep whirlpool, so *confused* [ *turbatus*] that I could neither fix a foot on the bottom nor swim to the top" [emphasis mine] (AT VII 24).<sup>4</sup> He does not know how to resolve his skeptical worries, and yet he cannot seem to go back to his old ways, to a time before those worries became explicit.

Later, in the Second Meditation, the passions come into play again. The meditator finds himself *amazed* (L. *miror*, AT VII 31; Fr. *étonné*, AT IX 25; CSM II 21) at how much he still wants to say that he understands the piece of wax through the eye and not through the mind, and so at just how prone to error his mind is. Moreover, this amazement seems to lead to other passions which then steer him back on course to perceiving the wax by the mind alone. He tells himself that "one *desiring* to know above and beyond the common people should feel *ashamed* of having doubts based on the forms of speech that the common people have invented" [emphasis mine] (AT VII 32),<sup>5</sup> and, in so doing, he brings himself back to the realization that he cannot "really and truly perceive" the wax "without a human mind."

The passions appear again in certain central passages in the Third Meditation. In the French edition, at the opening of the meditation, the meditator includes "loves and hates"—two of the six primitive passions Descartes sets out in the *Passions of the Soul*—in the list of things a thinking thing does (AT IX 27). Moreover, at the critical moment at the conclusion of the meditation—when he realizes not only that God exists as the all-perfect being but also that God is his creator and that he has "in some manner been made in his image and likeness"—the meditator pauses to *wonder* [L. *admirari*; Fr. *admirer*] and to *adore* [L. *adorare*; Fr. *adorer*] the beauty of God himself, "before examining this point more carefully and investigating other truths which may be derived from it":

I should like to pause here and spend some time in the contemplation of God; to reflect on his attributes and to gaze with *wonder* and *adoration* on the beauty of this immense light, so far as the eye of my darkened intellect can bear it. (AT VII 52; AT IX 41; CSM II 36; emphasis mine)

Although one might not think of wonder as a passion, it is for Descartes—and a very important one. According to the account of the *Passions*, wonder is the "first of all the passions" (PS a. 53; AT XI 373). It is "a sudden surprise of the soul which carries it to consider attentively those objects which seem to it rare and extraordinary" (PS a. 70; AT XI 380), and Descartes claims that this surprise is useful insofar as it "makes us learn and retain in our memory things of which we have previously been ignorant" and that in so doing it "disposes us to the acquisition of the sciences" (PS a. 75; AT XI 384). Thus, that to which wonder disposes us is precisely the aim of the *Meditations* themselves: the meditator is engaged in these exercises just because he wants to achieve something firm and lasting in the sciences. Moreover, it is fitting that the meditator feels wonder *here*. For it is at this point in the *Meditations* that the meditator finds a crucial element of what he needs to meet his goal—a knowledge that God exists and is not a deceiver. Confident once again about his God-given faculty of reason, he proceeds to arrive at the method for avoiding error (in the Fourth Meditation). And from there, he makes swift progress to a knowledge of the nature of the material world, an understanding of his own place in the world as a whole as a union of mind and body, and ultimately to the scientific knowledge he seeks.

After the Third Meditation, the meditator expresses his passions several times, but less poignantly. All we see in the Fourth Meditation is the meditator proclaiming himself *confident* (L. *confidam*; Fr. *conclu si évidemment*, AT VII 53; AT IX 42) that God exists and that his own existence depends on God. He also avers that he *should not be surprised*<sup>6</sup> that he cannot fathom the reasons God does what he does—in particular why God has made him vulnerable to error, both recalling the Second Meditation and bringing home just how much has changed. In the Fifth Meditation, the meditator suggests that he is constantly *suspicious* (L. *suspicio*; Fr. *soupçon*, AT VII 64; AT IX 51) of things that might have slipped in through the senses. Here there is little of the drama that informed the earlier expressions. It is perhaps worth remarking, however, that throughout these later meditations, the meditator urges himself to be ever diligent (L. *diligenter*). While diligence involves an act of will, and so might not be thought of as a passion properly speaking, there does seem to be a feeling of alertness or vigilance associated with it that might be considered a passion of sorts. Indeed, it might well be a passion akin to Cartesian generosity, the feeling we have upon knowing that we have a free will and resolving to use that will well.

However, there is a full-voiced expression of a passion again at the very end of the *Meditations*, when the meditator proclaims that “the exaggerated doubts of the last few days should be dismissed as *laughable*” [L. *risu dignae*; Fr. *ridicules*; emphasis mine] (AT VII 89; AT IX 71). Laughter for Descartes is a clear-cut expression of emotion, one he details in the *Passions* as occurring when we feel a moderate joy intermingled with some wonder or hatred. Certainly it makes sense that the meditator feels just this at the end of the *Meditations*, for he might well rejoice in his dissolution of the skeptical arguments he has set himself and, at the same time, hate all they represent: such doubts could be seen as unsuitable to one confident in his ability to reason, one who can wonder (and adore) a God whose mark he bears and to whom he bears a resemblance.

## 2. A MERE RHETORICAL FLOURISH?

While it is clear that the passions are present in the *Meditations*, it is not at all clear what we should make of this fact. Indeed, one might think we should make nothing much of it at all. In the survey of the previous section, I have

suggested that the meditator's passions, as he expresses them, seem to be in keeping with what is going on in the work, at least according to the definitions of the passions that Descartes offers much later. But this consistency need not imply that they signify anything of particular philosophical interest. They might simply be rhetorical flourishes tacked on to help readers engage with the work, or to signal to them that they are following along. Indeed, they might not even be that intentional. The language of the passions might be a stylistic accident, a reflection of Descartes' personal predilections in writing.<sup>7</sup>

Either of these readings is possible. Since Descartes mentions nothing in either the Replies to Objections or in his correspondence about how the passions figure in the *Meditations*, one might well conclude that they are philosophically insignificant. Further, taking the meditator's passions as philosophically accidental is consistent with one way of understanding the *Meditations* as meditations. We might think of meditating as engaging in an interpretive exercise,<sup>8</sup> as looking within oneself and interpreting what one finds there. In doing so, one might well, and perhaps one should, arrive at a new self-understanding, but this understanding achieves only at the cognitive level. On this line, any insight one acquires through meditating has no practical consequences; one may have a changed understanding of the contents of one's mind, but this understanding does not affect one's actions—what one does and how one does it. Certainly, understanding the passions as an accidental feature of the *Meditations* is consistent with reading the work in this way. On this reading, the meditator will feel the passions he is disposed to feel, and that may well help him to understand himself better—as a being that has passions, or even as one that feels what he does upon entertaining certain thoughts. But that is all. At the end of his meditations, the meditator may no longer have thoughts he once had—he has managed to successfully overcome his habitual opinions—and so he may no longer have the passions that went with them. Instead, other thoughts may be at the fore of his mind, and hence also other passions. What is important, however, is that he has his thoughts in order, and the passions themselves have played no central role in achieving this result. Insofar as this is so, there is nothing very interesting to say about the passions: certain passions go with certain thoughts, and that is all there is to it. All the work of the *Meditations* is a matter of dispassionate reasoning, and the passions just follow along.



However, even this weak interpretation of the passions in the *Meditations* still leaves us with some real questions. Most readers of Descartes, it seems to me, do not think very carefully about the metaphysical status of this “I” which is doing the meditating, narrating as he goes along. Commentators do claim that the “I,” and thus the meditator, is nothing but a thing that thinks, and of course there is good reason for them to do so—that does seem to be the lesson of the *cogito*, after all. But it also seems that many commentators do not reflect much on what that claim entails. If one pairs that claim with the substance dualism with which Descartes is usually associated, it can certainly seem that the meditator is—at least for the duration of his meditations—disembodied. My sense is that many readers do make this step, albeit unwittingly.<sup>9</sup>

However, the presence of the passions suggests that the narrator of the *Meditations* has a more complicated metaphysical status. For if the meditator were the disembodied thinking thing that Descartes’ dualism seems to suggest is possible, then he should not be feeling any passions at all. The passions, for Descartes, while they are states of the soul and so proper to a thinking thing, are also brought on by a bodily state. As he defines them in a. 27 of the *Passions of the Soul*, they are “perceptions or sensations or excitations of the soul which are related to it [the soul] in particular and which are caused, maintained and strengthened by some movement of the spirits” (AT XI 349). The “spirits” here are the animal spirits, the most rarefied parts of the blood, and so are very much corporeal. Insofar as the passions do take root in the body in this way, they are proper to the *union* of mind and body. Thus, the fact that the meditator *does* express passions at all, even if they serve only a rhetorical purpose, challenges us to think a little more carefully about what sort of thing the meditator is. For on standard readings of Descartes’ dualism, it does not seem that the meditator could be *purely* a thinking thing *and* feel the passions he does.

There are two ways one might try to preserve the standard reading, but they are not without their interpretive challenges. On one hand, one can admit that feeling passions is antithetical to being purely an intellectual thing and remark that the meditator’s expressions of passion do not come at a time when he is *supposed* to be separated from his body. Consider those which occur in the First Meditation: there, the meditator is still actively engaged in withdrawing from the senses, the material world and with them his body and his passions. Thus, the passions we find him expressing need not pre-

clude our seeing the rest of the *Meditations* as the exercises of a purely intellectual being. And while those of the Second Meditation seem to occur at a time when the meditator *is* meant to be engaging in purely intellectual exercises—it is here that we get the *cogito*, and the study of the piece of wax that reveals to the meditator that he knows the wax by the mind alone and not by the senses directly—still, the presence of the passions here is explicable by those who would want to defend our prereflective intuitions about the meditator. While the passions expressed at the beginning of the meditation do indicate the meditator’s equivocal position between his old ways and the new one he has committed himself to, in pressing forward, he is throwing himself wholeheartedly into the new way, and so giving himself over to his purely intellectual nature, and, at the same time, leaving off his confusion. Equally, in studying the piece of wax, the meditator has allowed himself to slide back to the position of the First Meditation; the meditator himself admits that he is giving his mind “free rein” to wander off to consider material things, though they be doubtful. And it is entirely in keeping with his re-entering the material world for the meditator to feel passions just as he admits his sensations.

Yet as we have seen the passions persist *throughout* the *Meditations*, and one might think it a stretch to come up with similar accounts of the meditator’s metaphysical entitlement to feel emotions again and again. Indeed, it might well be hard to do so in the case of the wonder at the end of the Third Meditation. But there is a greater difficulty. Such an interpretation must also provide an account of why the meditator slides in and out of his existence as a purely intellectual being, and of how such slides are possible. It is not at all clear how such a story might go. Telling it would certainly seem to involve thinking in much more detail than most commentators have done about the nature of pure thought and about what it means for a human being (a *union* of soul and body) to engage in pure thought.

The other route one can go in defending the standard approach to reading the *Meditations* has similar consequences. One need not deny that a pure thinking thing can feel passions. One can get around the apparent problem posed by the meditator’s passions by leaning on a distinction Descartes draws between sensual or sensuous passions and intellectual or rational passions in a letter to Chanut of 1 February 1647. He draws this distinction in the case of love. Sensual love “is nothing but a confused thought, aroused in the soul by some motion of the nerves” (AT IV 603; CSMK 306). It is the

passion we feel as a result of the movements of the animal spirits. Rational love, on the other hand, “consists simply in the fact that when our soul perceives some present or absent good, which it judges to be fitting for itself, it joins itself to it willingly, that is to say, it considers itself and the good in question as forming two parts of a single whole” (AT IV 601; CSMK 306). What is rational about this sort of love is that we feel it *for a reason*; it is caused by a judgment on the part of the soul. And so, Descartes thinks that “[a]ll these movements of the will which constitute love, joy, sadness and desire in so far as they are rational thoughts and not passions, could exist in our soul even if it had no body” (AT IV 602; CSMK 306).<sup>10</sup> While the two kinds of passion often come together—the confused thought of sensual love, “makes it [the soul] disposed to have other, clearer, thought which constitutes rational love” (AT IV 603; CSMK 306)—they need not: we can feel the passion of love without finding a reason to love anything in particular, and similarly we can love something with good reason, yet not feel it in any bodily way. The passions the meditator articulates in the *Meditations* might just be instances of intellectual passions that are unaccompanied by their sensual counterparts.<sup>11</sup> The meditator could, after all, have felt them whether he had a body or not, and this seems to be just the status of the other more metaphysical claims the meditator makes; their being true is not at all contingent on whether he has a body or not.

While this suggestion does go a long way toward eliminating the problems posed by the meditator’s passions, it is not as simple a solution as it initially seems. For these Cartesian intellectual passions are notoriously hard to make sense of. In what way are they different from the judgments from which they arise? And if they are not so different from them, then it is not at all clear why they should be called passions; judgments are paradigm cases of actions for Descartes. But even if we can get clear on this aspect of Cartesian mental life, it seems that we are only left with a further puzzle. If, for Descartes, we do have mental states which can be properly called intellectual passions, then it would seem that pure thought, the kind of thought in which we could engage even if we did not have a body, has an affective component. And if this is so, then we need to ask further questions: What is the structure of Cartesian pure thought? For Descartes, pure thought seems to be that through which we grasp a priori truths. How do we arrive at a priori knowledge? Does the affective aspect of pure thought figure in our attaining that knowledge? If so, how?

So the fact that the meditator feels passions raises important questions at the intersection of two elements of Descartes’ philosophy—his dualism and the project of pure thought on the one hand, and his concern with *human* beings, and in particular *human* reason, on the other. Standard accounts of Descartes’ dualism take as their starting point his claim that mind and body are really distinct, and this claim, by Descartes’ own account, entails that mind and body are two independent entities. Many commentators take this claim of independence to be a claim about the *separability* of mind and body, relying on the discussion of the real distinction of mind and body in the Sixth Meditation: “. . . that I clearly and distinctly understand one thing apart from another is enough to make me certain that the two things are distinct, since they are capable of being separated, at least by God” (AT VII 78; CSM II 54).<sup>12</sup> Still, it remains to understand the nature of this separability, and most commentators seem to take it that whatever is proper to the mind alone could be attributed to it, even if the mind were never joined to the body at all. Thus, if the meditator feels passions, and passions have a bodily cause, then it seems that either he is not to be thought of as a purely thinking thing or we need to reconsider Descartes’ notion of pure thought. Neither option is an easy course to take. Certainly, the difficulties of the first option should be clear: rethinking the metaphysical status of the Cartesian meditator would involve challenging a well-entrenched dogma of philosophy. The second option also poses difficulties, since the meditator takes himself to have found solid metaphysical ground in his investigation of thought alone. Any rethinking of the nature of pure thought should preserve the stability of this ground. In addition, if the meditator’s passions are seen not as having bodily causes, but as intellectual in nature, we are faced with the challenge of further explicating the structure of pure thought such that it includes these passions. And doing this would involve getting clear on just what the relation of pure thought is to the rest of human thought—another large project.

Thus, even if we presuppose a very weak reading of the place of the passions in the *Meditations*, we are led to some rather daunting philosophical questions. Indeed, these questions are so philosophically central that one might begin to suspect that perhaps the passions are not such a philosophically neutral aspect of the *Meditations* after all. In the next section, I consider the consequences of a stronger reading, by asking just where we might be led if we initially presume that the meditator’s passions are integral to his philosophical project.

3. THE PASSIONS AND THE MEDITATOR'S  
SELF-TRANSFORMATION

In section 2, I noted that a weak reading of the place of the passions in the *Meditations* is consistent with understanding it as an interpretive meditative enterprise. There is, however, another way of understanding meditating: as a revolutionary enterprise. On this line, at the end of one's meditations, one is transformed; meditations are meant to change the meditator's *life*. Through one's new self-understanding, one's actions are affected. And insofar as our passions dispose us to action,<sup>13</sup> reading Descartes' *Meditations* along this line might well lead us to think that the presence of the passions could be philosophically relevant. At the end of his meditations, the meditator should feel differently—and so be inclined to act differently—upon having certain thoughts than he does at the beginning. Such a change in his passions might well be an integral part of the more general metaphysical and epistemological progress the meditator makes in the *Meditations*.

It does seem that the meditator changes how he feels about things over the course of the *Meditations*. That is, it does seem that the meditator does not think about different things. Rather, he thinks about the same things but feels differently about them. To see this, we need only look at the course his passions take. The meditator begins with a desire to establish something firm and lasting in the sciences. This desire seems to amount to nothing other than a desire for knowledge or certainty, for the meditator quickly moves from this desire to skepticism. And, as we have seen, the skepticism in turn leads to fear and apprehension. Since it seems he cannot ascertain any truth, the meditator seems left with a choice: either he can pursue his desire and risk the conclusion that he might well not be able to know anything, or he can forsake his desire and try to sustain the illusion of having the knowledge under which he has been operating. Either way, there is ground for trepidation. Yet by the end of the *Meditations*, his fear and apprehension have given way to laughter, though the meditator still presumably maintains his desire for knowledge. What has changed?

For one, the meditator has answered his own skeptical challenges.<sup>14</sup> At the end of the First Meditation, he worries whether he was given a nature such that he could ever have knowledge:

But what about when I was considering something very simple and straightforward in arithmetic or geometry, for example that two and three added together make five, and so on? Did I not see at least these things clearly enough to affirm their truth? Indeed, the only reason for my later judgement that they were open to doubt was that it occurred to me that perhaps some God could have given me a nature such that I was deceived even in matters which seemed most evident. (AT VII 35–36; CSM II 25)<sup>15</sup>

But by the Sixth Meditation, the meditator has achieved “a better knowledge of myself and the author of my being, [so that] although I do not think I should heedlessly accept everything I seem to have acquired from the senses, neither do I think that everything should be called into doubt” (AT VII 77–78; CSM II 54). Surely, the meditator's newfound confidence in his nature as a thinking thing goes a long way to making the earlier skeptical arguments laughable.

But is this enough? It can well seem that what he knows of his nature does not fully answer the skepticism of the First Meditation. At the end of the *Meditations* the meditator admits that he does go wrong about many things; indeed, he recognizes that he is susceptible to “true errors of nature” (AT VII 85; CSM II 59) and that “the nature of man as a combination of mind and body is such that it is bound to mislead him from time to time” (AT VII 88; CSM II 61). Surely, so long as he is prone to these sorts of errors, errors which are in principle unavoidable, he has not banished the specter of his skepticism. At the beginning of the *Meditations* it is just this possibility that he might go wrong unwittingly by his nature that leads him to despair.

Yet at the end of the work, the possibility of such mistakes no longer leaves the meditator in such a desperate state. One might say that his thoughts about the weakness of his own nature are no longer invested with the same passions. What once made him fearful now makes him laugh; he feels differently about things.

Here is a suggestion: the project of the *Meditations* involves the regulation of the passions just as much as it involves laying a metaphysical foundation which can answer the skeptical arguments of the First Meditation. In particular, the project involves a regulation of the desire for knowledge



from which the project begins. At the beginning of the *Meditations*, the meditator seems to desire absolute certainty about everything. His hope appears to be to never make a mistake again. Thus, he does not find the distinction between opinions which are “patently false” and those which are “not completely certain and indubitable” significant in his quest for knowledge (AT VII 18; CSM II 12), for only if all his beliefs are true can he hope to go forward from them to further beliefs and ultimately to a body of knowledge. Yet by the end of the work, his desire seems to be for something subtly different. He still is seeking the truth, but he no longer demands to be assured that *all* his beliefs are true. In the last lines of the *Meditations*, the meditator is reconciled to the commonsensical notion that he will make mistakes. In dismissing his earlier doubts about whether he was sleeping or waking, he says:

I ought not to have even the slightest doubt of their reality if, after calling upon all the senses as well as my memory and my intellect in order to check them, I receive no conflicting reports from any of these sources. For from the fact that God is not a deceiver it follows that in cases like these I am completely free from error. But since the pressure of things to be done does not always allow us to stop and make such a meticulous check, it must be admitted that in this human life we are often liable to make mistakes about particular things, and we must acknowledge the weakness of our nature. (AT VII 90; CSM II 62)

The meditator’s desire for knowledge has been tempered. He now wants to know what he is capable of knowing, and he strives to know within those limits.

The conclusion of the *Meditations* follows the end of the Fourth Meditation. There the meditator has discovered the method for avoiding error: he will succeed in having only true beliefs if he affirms only those ideas he perceives clear and distinctly.<sup>16</sup> But this discovery is followed immediately by a recognition of the limits of what this method gets him. For he himself is limited: he has a finite intellect, and “it is in the nature of a finite intellect to lack understanding of many things” (AT VII 60; CSM II 42). It is not within his rights, however, to complain about his limitations—it is the nature God has given him.<sup>17</sup> With this recognition of his own nature, and the limitations that come along with it, the meditator clarifies his goals. The task can no longer be to be absolutely certain about everything, since

some things will lie beyond his grasp. Rather, he is concerned to distinguish what he is capable of knowing from what he is not, and it seems that in drawing this distinction, he is able to temper his desire for knowledge: he now wants to know all he *can* know.<sup>18</sup>

Such a reading is consistent with the other passions expressed in the *Meditations*. In proceeding methodically to his first certainty—“‘I am, I exist’ is necessarily true whenever it is put forward by me or conceived in my mind” (AT VII 25; CSM II 17)—the meditator begins to temper himself. We see no pronounced expression of emotion in the rest of the first part of the Second Meditation. But this one truth is insufficient for the meditator’s self-mastery. As he observes that his knowledge of material things seems more distinct than his knowledge of himself, it is as if the meditator is overcome once again by the desires that led him down the skeptical road:

my mind enjoys wandering off and will not yet submit to being restrained within the bounds of truth. Very well then; just this once let us give it a completely free rein, so that after a while, when it is time to tighten the rein, it may more readily submit to being curbed. (AT VII 29–30; CSM II 20)

His strategy for overcoming his wanton ways seems to resemble that which might be imparted in a homily about raising children. And here, as he allows himself once again to desire “to know above and beyond the common people” (AT VII 32), we observe the meditator once again feeling a passion: he is ashamed at himself for slipping back into his old ways and taking them to be guiding him toward the truth. It is this shame that steers him back on course to thinking through just how it is that he understands the wax most clearly and distinctly. As the meditator proceeds, again we see no pronounced display of emotion—that is, until the end of the Third Meditation, where the meditator pauses to wonder and adore God. And, as noted earlier, once the meditator has come to understand himself in relation to God, we do not see any pronounced display of emotion from the meditator. Gone are his fear and despair, as well as his shame. We can take this reticence to reflect not so much the absence of passion as a newfound temperance.

This story about how the passions figure in the *Meditations* accords well with what Descartes says in the *Passions of the Soul* about the regulation of the passions. There, he suggests that the regulation of the passions is effected



primarily through generosity, and generosity, as Descartes explains it, involves the recognition on each of our parts that we have a free will, paired with the resolution to use our will well. The meditator's diligence in following the method for avoiding error that he has discovered can be seen as exemplifying this resolve. Furthermore, as I have argued elsewhere,<sup>19</sup> generosity in this sense requires that we understand that we have the power to do otherwise—for this is what free will consists in—but also that we have our limitations. We must figure out what we are capable of doing but also come to terms with our limited ability to reach a definitive conclusion about what the right thing to do is when we must take action. Now, one of the principle functions of generosity is to remedy those “vain desires” which we have for things which, in truth, lie outside of our proper domain. So, in a. 144, Descartes writes:

But because these passions can incline us to any action only through the mediation of the desire they excite, it is that desire in particular which we should be concerned to regulate; and the principal utility of moral philosophy consists in this. Now, as I have lately said that [desire] is always good when it follows true knowledge, it similarly cannot fail to be bad when it is founded on some error. *And it seems to me that the error most commonly committed in connection with desires is to fail to distinguish sufficiently the things that depend entirely on us from those that do not depend on us.* (AT XI 436; emphasis mine)

The vain desires for which Descartes claims generosity is a remedy are just those whose satisfaction we assume depends on us, even though it actually does not. Generosity serves as a remedy for them just because it leads us to draw the distinction which we are not prone to draw: a generous person recognizes those things which depend only on herself as well as those things which in no way depend on her, and she tailors her desires so that she wants only that which is within her power. It is just such a recognition of his limitations that, I am claiming, leads to the transformation of the meditator's desire for knowledge.

If we understand the meditator to be regulating his passions in this way, then we are also afforded a richer understanding of the wonder he expresses at the end of the Third Meditation. We can see it as not only particularly appropriate but also as a critical part of the argument of the *Meditations* them-

selves. I have already noted that it seems appropriate for the meditator to express wonder at this point in the work, for what follows it are precisely the effects proper to wonder as Descartes describes it in the passions—it leads the meditator to knowledge. Further, it seems to be a truism that God is wonderful in Descartes' sense: rare, insofar as God is the only thing which can be the cause of the meditator's own existence, and extraordinary, insofar as God is the perfect being capable of causing the existence of another being who has an idea of a perfect being. But I want to suggest that there is more to it as well.

Generosity, for Descartes, is a species of esteem, which itself is a species of wonder; we esteem something just when we wonder at its worth—its meanness or lowness. In the case of generosity, we esteem ourselves as highly as we legitimately can, and we do so just by recognizing our own freedom and then realizing that freedom in acting well. One might thus say that Cartesian generosity is a wonder at our own free will. There is a sense in which the meditator, in wondering at God at the end of the Third Meditation, is also beginning to wonder at himself, and in particular at his own free will. It is this wonder which leads him forward to further knowledge of his own nature, and ultimately to the method for avoiding error. And it is this method that holds the key to his resolution of his skeptical worries.

Let us consider the penultimate paragraph of the Third Meditation. It begins as follows:

And indeed it is no surprise that God, in creating me, should have placed this idea in me to be as it were, the mark of the craftsman stamped on his work—not that the mark need be anything distinct from the work itself. But the mere fact that God created me is a very strong basis for believing that I am somehow made in his image and likeness, and that I perceive that likeness, which includes the idea of God, by the same faculty which enables me to perceive myself. (AT VII 51; CSM II 35)

The meditator here intimates that some identification between himself and God is in order—he is somehow made in God's image and likeness—and so it seems that in wondering at God, he also wonders at himself a bit. But there is more, for in the Fourth Meditation, the meditator goes on to claim that the similarity that he and God share lies just in the freedom of the will. Thus, the wonder at himself he feels through his wonder at God

becomes precisely that wonder at one's own freedom that constitutes in part generosity. It is this generosity that allows him to see that he has no cause for complaint in how God has created him. And his coming to terms with his own nature as a finite thinking thing in this way ultimately leads him to remedy the excesses of his desire for knowledge. Once he understands himself properly, he cannot help but desire to know only that which he is capable of knowing.

So the laughter at the end of the *Meditations* is a laughter not only at the hyperbole of the skeptical arguments. It is also a laughter at himself and his own excesses. His earlier aspirations to absolute certainty amounted to wanting a superhuman degree of knowledge, and that desire was indeed ridiculous.

Reading the meditator's passions as integral to the project of the *Meditations* in this way does not take away from any of the epistemological or metaphysical claims of that work. Descartes is still to be understood as putting forward a view about what needs to be in place if we are to be able to claim to have knowledge about anything at all. But such metaphysical positions are not held in a realm of pure reason, divorced from our nature as human beings. Part of knowing, for Descartes, is knowing who one is, and this self-knowledge essentially involves feeling a certain way toward oneself. This feeling, the passion of generosity, in turn informs one's other thoughts. So, on this reading of the place of the passions in the *Meditations*, epistemology is not to be divorced from one's affective life. Knowledge involves self-knowledge, which is emotionally laden. Knowing involves not only having one's thoughts in order, but also having one's feelings in order. But if the passions are integral to the *Meditations*, there is still much to clarify. We are certainly left with the questions arising out of the weaker reading, questions about the affective dimension of pure thought, and about the relation between pure thought and full-fledged human reason. These questions also get a particular grip insofar as they are tied to questions about just how affect figures in self-understanding, and in our knowledge of the world.

My aim in this paper was to raise a slew of questions about the place of the passions in Descartes' *Meditations*, questions for which I have very few answers. For most readers of Descartes, the fact that the passions are mentioned there at all is surprising. I hope I have clarified just how it is surprising. On the one hand, even if we do not choose to make much of the meditator's expression of his passions, their presence challenges our assumptions

about Descartes' dualism and, in particular, about the nature of pure thought, as well as our assumptions about the nature of Descartes' meditator. On the other hand, if we do choose to take the passions as integral to the work, we not only are faced with the same sorts of questions about Cartesian metaphysics, but also are presented with an epistemological program which takes our affective life to be an essential part of our claims to knowledge. Either course should move us to feel at least a bit of wonder, and lead us to set about exploring the new text we have found.

## NOTES

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1. In providing this catalog I hope to have been complete, but undoubtedly there are expressions I have missed. Clearly any interpretation of the significance of these expressions must be able to accommodate instances I overlooked.

I use the following standard abbreviations for Descartes' works:

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| AT   | <i>Oeuvres de Descartes</i> , ed. C. Adam and P. Tannery (Paris: Vrin, 1996). Followed by volume and page numbers.   |
| CSM  | <i>The Philosophical Writings of Descartes</i> , vols. I and II, ed. and trans. J. Cottingham, R. Stoothoff, and D. Murdoch (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984–85). Followed by volume and page numbers. |
| CSMK | <i>The Philosophical Writings of Descartes</i> , vol. III, ed. and trans. J. Cottingham, R. Stoothoff, D. Murdoch, and A. Kenny (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991). Followed by page numbers.           |
| PS   | <i>The Passions of the Soul</i> , followed by article numbers. Translated from the edition in AT.  |

2. I provide the Latin: "aliquando firmum & mansarum *cupiam* in scientiis stabilire" (AT VII 17). The French points less conclusively to a passion here as it reads simply: "si je *voulais* établir quelque chose de ferme et de constant dans les sciences . . ." (AT IX 13). Emphasis mine in both cases.

3. I have here deviated slightly from CSM, which translates both *timet* and *vereor* as "dread" and what I have translated as "spontaneously"—from *sponte* in the